

Home Education Advisory Council 2014-2015 Annual Report

Home education law in New Hampshire exists to meet compulsory school attendance requirements for students between the ages of 6 and 18. In 2013-2014, there were 5,914 homeschooled students in New Hampshire, an increase of 361 students from the previous year (the 2014-2015 homeschool enrollments are not yet listed on the Department's website). While RSA 193-A states that home education must be provided by parents for their own children unless otherwise agreed upon by the participating agency, home educators have traditionally taken advantage of part time classes at their local public and private schools, and through other community resources. An unwritten understanding has been in place between the NH Department of Education's HEAC liaisons and the homeschooling community since the early years of home education law in which the definition of "provided" means at least 51% of the instruction must be conducted by the parent in order for the program to be considered home education. Within this context, the following issues were presented before and discussed by the Home Education Advisory Council during the past school year:

1. Confusion Over Meeting Compulsory School Attendance/What Constitutes Home Education

Parents whose children are being educated through a distance learning program in which they are enrolled full time in a "private school located in another state which has been approved by the state education agency of the state in which the school is located" requested clarification as to whether their situation meets compulsory school attendance laws for nonpublic school attendance, or if they should submit home education paperwork. The discussion hinged on the definition of the word "attend", which is not given in the RSA or administrative rules, and is unclear now that education provided offsite/online meets public school *attendance* requirements.

Parents are being told that signing up for the online public charter school, VLACS, is homeschooling. For instance, a HEAC representative was contacted by a parent seeking information about conducting a homeschool evaluation for her child who had been taken all of her courses through VLACS (English, math, social studies, science, gym, and art). Because the homeschool law states that education must be provided by the parent, and since all of the education was provided by a public school, she was advised that she really was not homeschooling. It is problematic to call an education which is being solely provided by a public or private school *homeschooling* just because the student is interfacing with the school from home. Should the parent be held accountable for the educational progress of a child in such a program? If an evaluation would be assessing the education provided solely or mainly by an outside entity, should the parent be required to conduct a homeschool evaluation? This problem is exacerbated by VLACS enrollment policies which are not in line with home education law – enrollment in five courses in a semester is not considered to be full time enrollment, but is obviously not home education under the existing understanding unless the student is completing ten to eleven courses per semester

A NH certified teacher, who was seeking information on conducting homeschool evaluations, reported that she was hired by a *group* of families to teach their “homeschooled” children five full days per week from September through June and keep an in-depth portfolio on each student. She decided to hire someone else to perform the evaluations, but does not know if the families had the approval of their participating agencies for the home education to be provided by someone other than the parents.

A Seacoast-area newspaper reporter was seeking information on home education because she was writing an article about a business in which a NH certified teacher is offering group classes for paid tuition and calling it a homeschool co-op. This is a co-opting of the term “homeschool co-op”, as homeschool cooperatives are nonprofit organizations in which parents cooperatively teach classes to their own children. The business owner told the reporter that he was submitting grades to the state, which cannot be true since neither home educators nor homeschool co-ops submit grades. The reporter was concerned that group homeschooling conducted in this manner is not subject to health and safety codes.

A HEAC member reported an increasing number of phone calls from school districts wondering where the line is between homeschooling and public schooling, particularly when students are taking high school or career and technical education courses. One issue is that the tuition bill for homeschoolers using CTC goes back to the local school district. For their own enrolled students the district would forward the per pupil tuition they receive from the state for public school attendance directly to the CTC, however when a student is enrolled as homeschooling the district does not get a tuition payment from the state to send to the CTC so it comes out of their budget instead, when it often has not been figured into the budget to begin with. School districts contract with technical centers for a certain number of seats, but when a homeschooler signs up for a technical program independently it blows the school district’s contract. The passage of SB151 this year, which allows school districts to receive pro-rated adequacy funding (when money is available) for home educated students who participate in courses at their local public high schools, may alleviate the budgetary problem but not the contractual obligations. This issue also points to the problem of defining home education as it becomes apparent that a student taking multiple courses or full time hours at the tech center cannot possibly be homeschooling if only for the number of hours in a day.

2. Lack of Documentation of Home Education Programs

Representatives of a nonpublic school in Center Harbor, which is closing and merging with another school out of state, were wondering what to do with the homeschool records they have on file. Apparently they have already been destroying documents older than 10 years old.

An adult who graduated from a NH home education program in 2008 cannot get documentation of his education, which he needs in order to verify his identity for a passport application in lieu of other records (birth certificate/SS card) withheld/not filed by his parents.

Background screening companies are seeking information on the location of NH homeschool attendance and graduation records in order to verify education information on employment and college admissions applications.

3. Graduation Statement

A change in the 2014-2015 edition of the Federal Student Financial Aid Handbook has clarified the procedure to be used to establish federal financial aid eligibility for homeschool graduates. The current statement on the Department's website is not in keeping with the new federal guidelines.

4. Deliberate Misuse of the Law

A public school principal had been meeting with enrolled students and sending them home from school with a notice of intent to home educate for their parents to sign, without the prior approval of the parents. The same principal had also been telling parents that they should homeschool because "you don't have to do anything". This case was referred to Department staff.

Some telephone calls received by HEAC members revealed that other parents do not want to refer their push-out issues to the Department because, by the time they seek outside help, they are so frustrated with the public education system they are not willing to try to gain resolution of their underlying problems.

The Department liaison reported communication with a school district in which staff members were concerned about a family using the home education law to withdraw their children from public school in order to avoid further investigation into alleged abuse and neglect.

These issues highlight the importance of the Department of Education's role in clarifying policies. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the Home Education Advisory Council has had difficulty obtaining a quorum at monthly meetings due to multiple ongoing vacancies of member seats, most notably the Nonpublic Schools Advisory Council and NH School Administrators' Association, organizations which are vital in providing input to the Council and communication between the homeschooling community and educational institutions in New Hampshire.

Respectfully submitted,

Amy Gall, Chair